

Oxfam's learning and innovation in Accountability

Oxfam has been stepping up investment in accountability to affected communities since 2016 in order to better meet Core Humanitarian Standards. While our programmes have feedback mechanisms, we are aware that there can be a significant variety in methodology and quality not just between country programmes but between projects and field locations. Since early 2017, we have started piloting frameworks and tools, building on on-going learning and aiming to better capture informal feedback as part of a [Your Word Counts](#) project. Learning generated is being integrated into our wider approach beyond pilot countries. While outcomes from the pilot are not all clear, this approach could very well be an important part of building better accountability across the humanitarian system. It is scaleable, can be used by multiple agencies, and has the potential for interoperability with reporting systems for reporting Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) and fraud, although more investment and research is needed to do this.

Building a better system

Oxfam aims to encourage a [more beneficiary led process and culture](#) where programmes respond systematically to feedback from communities, and to build a data-driven evidence based approach that is streamlined and embedded in local ways of working. Surveys of Oxfam's work on accountability imply that too often, although feedback is acted on, it is not documented, there is little accountability in ensuring that action has been taken and feedback loops closed, the lack of documentation means that data is not used to quantify trends and inform programme adaptation, and Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) is seen as the responsibility of MEAL teams, with prioritisation dependent on individual managers.

The current pilot projects are being implemented in Iraq, Ethiopia and Myanmar after an initial pilot in Jordan. There are plans to expand programmes in the middle east to the Occupied Territories of Palestine and Israel, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, and to Nigeria, not least to analyse trends at a regional level. In Myanmar Oxfam works with Solidarites International and feedback is referred between the two agencies. All data gathering is informed by Oxfam's Responsible Data Management and efforts are being made to both ensure confidentiality and provide feedback.

What this system looks like

The approach builds on the learning that people prefer to give feedback face to face to someone they know and trust, that much feedback is informal and therefore "lost", and that how people feel able to give feedback varies between cultures and localities. It assumes that offering a range of feedback mechanisms is the most appropriate way to gather feedback, and aims to capture formal and informal inputs. All staff are responsible for reporting and documenting feedback, and information from multiple sources is entered into the same data base. A case management work flow for following up on feedback is used, and specialised teams, to whom the feedback is referred, are responsible for responding to it. This is part of an effort to drive a cultural shift whereby accountability is the responsibility of all staff, owned by management, built into everyone's job descriptions and a standing agenda item in all team meetings. An equal emphasis is placed on making sure that communities have information about their rights and entitlement.

Practically, this means training all staff and partners on accountability mechanisms, and designing tools appropriate to the local context. At present Oxfam is doing this with staff and partners familiar with the context, but hopes that as teams get more confident this will be done with community members. All feedback is recorded, and categorised into one of 4 global categories (see box), as well as assigned to a technical team, allowing both referral and analysis.

Mobile Case Management

One way of gathering informal information is through a mobile app used by staff, partners and community members. Information recorded is immediately referred to the relevant teams, follow up tracked, and all actions are recorded. Initial learning is that people feel more confident that something will be done about information recorded in a phone,

Categorisation of data

Referred to programme teams

Category 1: Positive feedback

Category 2: Request for assistance

Category 3: Minor dissatisfaction with an activity

Referred to Programme manager

Category 4: Major dissatisfaction with an activity

Allegations of fraud, SEA, or other abuses of power

are reported immediately using the formal reporting mechanisms available, including whistleblowing hotlines or to the most senior manager.

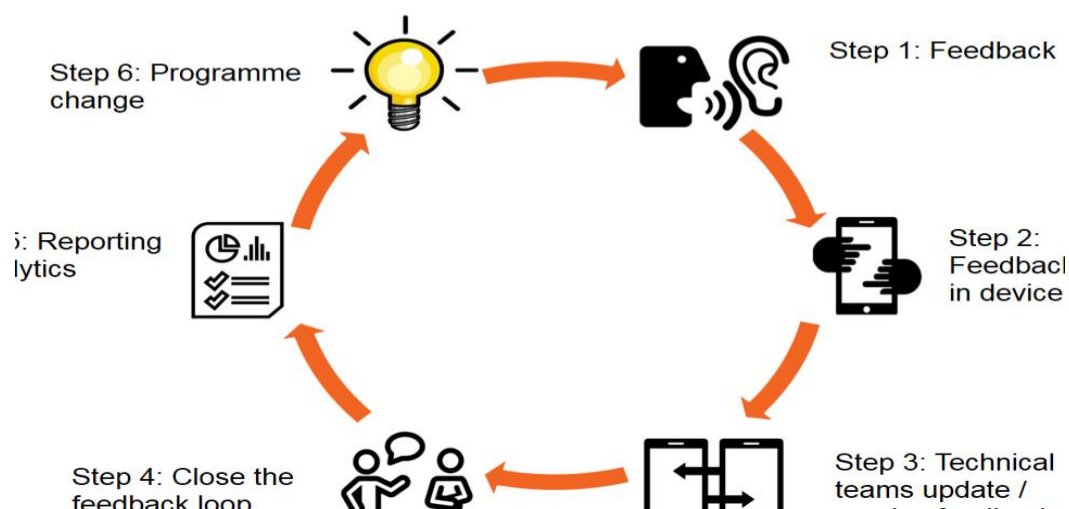
Current learning has led Oxfam to not include "request for information" as a global feedback category at present.

feeling that it has been formalised, and that there is a lot of enthusiasm for the approach from staff and beneficiaries. Learning to date includes that it is still more difficult for the most vulnerable to give feedback; government attitudes to gathering data can be restrictive meaning that not all feedback is being captured by teams; it still feels like additional work rather than part of everyday monitoring; working with different scripts can be rapidly worked around; and the speed at which this system can be rolled out and embedded is closely linked to leadership from country management, available funding and existing staff capacity.

Learning from the data

The data gathered has great potential to inform programme adaptation at a design level, not just an ad-hoc basis, and to support analysis of local, country, regional and global trends. While data graphics at a country level are easy to develop and immediately informative, more data and time is needed for substantive analysis above country level.

PROCESS



Reporting SEA and Fraud

As recommended by the IASC task force for Accountability to Affected Populations, there needs to be a strong and systematised link between feedback gathered during MEAL processes and whistle blowing on fraud, SEA and other abuses of power. All staff need to know to immediately refer any reports of this to senior managers and/ or appropriate focal points, rapidly escalating it beyond MEAL frameworks for an appropriate response.

All feedback collected as part of the mobile case management can be downloaded by MEAL staff, meaning that they can access all data, including potentially sensitive information. This means that cases that demand confidentiality cannot be reported into this system. They are instead immediately referred into the appropriate alternative systems.

However, it is technically possible to enter data into the mobile app and for this to be encrypted and/or transferred out into another system such as those used by Oxfam's whistle blowing or safeguarding teams. This is a potential area for development.

Building on this learning

Setting up this project is time and resource intensive in its first phase. However, dedicated resources here, combined with learning from other projects is strengthening Oxfam's systematisation of accountability to affected communities across its programmes. Ten Top Tips from this experience include clear actions around information sharing and transparency, promoting participation, handling feedback and complaints, and improving staff competencies and knowledge of international standards. As the experience of dedicated resources for this project implies, indicators and budget lines related to accountability lead to a greater emphasis on it, and greater prioritisation by programmes.

This approach should be scalable, can work between organisations, combines formal and informal feedback, provides data to inform programme change, and has the potential to interact with other systems including SEA and fraud reporting. Better accountability to affected communities requires a shift in culture so that MEAL is everyone's responsibility, and accountability to beneficiaries informs all our decision making. It will take time to systematise, but this could be a first step.